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HOW I BECAME A TOTAL ABSTAINER.*

BY MRS. LAURA ORMISTON CHANT.

I believe that this is the first temperance address I have given in Boston. I hope it may be one worth listening to. For, of all interesting topics under the sun, I think total abstinence is the most interesting, the most hopeful, and the most far-reaching in its consequences.

We teetotallers have learned that we must not drink alcoholic liquor if we want to do the work that the world needs of us, for alcohol is a brain poison. As humanity advances in culture and development, the need of brain-power is greater, and the choice is between alcohol and the best brain-power, because the more brain you have the more alcohol will poison you if you take it. It was all very well for our swinish ancestors, but when I hear people who do not know much about history talking about the good old days, I wish they could go back to them. Those good old days appear to me to be so far back that we can have no knowledge of them. Our honored ancestry in England apparently drank a good deal, drank so much

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that their brains did not develop greatly. If you will look at those old Puritans, of whom Dr. Hale speaks, you will find they were the men they were because they dared to rise above the bad manners and customs of their days. I wish we could get a powerful infusion of that Puritan spirit into boys and girls to-day, that they should be able to rise above what is weak and evil in the same heroic fashion. In Scandinavia it is apparent that they drank very copiously; and, when we think of their savagery and barbarism and of the horror of their religious notions,—that their very heaven was a place where they could drink the blood of their enemies out of their skulls,—I do not wonder at it, when I think of their coarse, dull natures, soaked in alcoholic liquor. No age of which we have any record in history has taken such pains to develop brains as ours. It has got its schools, its millions of books, its periodicals, lectures, inventions; and no nation,—I can say it truthfully and without suspicion of flattery,—no nation that we know of has taken such pains to develop brains, use them, and glorify the possession of them as the American nation. And so, if I say to you that the Old World played fast and loose with liquor and is still alive to-day, do not flatter yourselves that this nation will be able to do the same thing and live. You won't be able to do it. You have that in you through which alcohol will most surely destroy you if you give it

the chance. When some young fellow stands up and says it is all nonsense about alcohol, and he mentions how many glasses he can take without its affecting his head, he has simply announced that he is deficient in brain,—quantity or quality. The more brain there is in a man or woman, and the higher quality of that brain, the more deadly havoc will alcoholic liquor play with it. You who belong to Boston, you who are proud of it, and speak of the "hub of the universe," keep alcohol out, or you will not be able to keep Boston so.

Then there is another thing that I should like to call your attention to,—that we are all of us manifesting a great desire to-day to prolong life, and we are beginning to succeed. It is evident that this is a generation of longer-lived people than those which have gone before of which we have any statistics. It has a greater knowledge of hygiene; and in increasing ways it exhibits more kindness and more humanity, and these are helps to keep men and women longer upon the earth. When you have men or women whose lives are examples to those around them, it is a blessed boon that such a life should be prolonged by five or ten years; and, if we can prove that total abstinence from alcohol tends to the preservation and prolongation of life, we have settled the fate of alcoholic liquor in the minds of all who have the good of the individual and the race at heart. Now, an assertion cannot be proved

by statistics; but, if you know how to use statistics, they are a great help.

What have we in England in the way of statistics? We have had recently a curious *contretemps*, which for a short time threw the ranks of total abstainers into dismay. One of our statisticians, Dr. Trambard Owen, published some statistics. They were to show the comparative rate of life-value between people who took alcoholic liquor to excess, those who took it in moderation, and those who did not take it at all. When the statistics came out, there was a howl from the total abstainers, and shouts of victory from the liquor men. For the statistics proved undoubtedly that the drunkard lived longer than the total abstainer! We knew it could not be so, that the poor young fellow who took to drink was hurried to an untimely grave. Dr. Owen was solemnly interviewed and taken to task. "What do you mean," he was asked, "by publishing statistics that are not true to known facts?" "Let me see them," he said. And, lo! this is what had happened,—simply that the compositor who had set up the type was evidently not a total abstainer, and he had put the drunkards' lives under the total-abstainers' head and the total-abstainers' lives under the drunkards' head! That shows that you cannot always depend absolutely on what you see in the newspaper. But, alas! a mistake travels fast and far. These figures had gone the round of the news-

papers, and every one was discussing them. My husband, who is a stanch total abstainer, overheard in a railway carriage a young fellow say, "Here is a blow for those total abstainers: they won't be able to hold up their heads after this!" And his companion laughingly rejoined, "I will take an extra glass on the strength of it." My husband said, "You had better wait and see if it is true; for all the scientists who have studied the question say that total abstinence is far more compatible with health and long life than even the moderate use of alcoholic liquors."

And now I want to mention another fact. We have a London Temperance Hospital, and the object-lesson that it presents year after year ought to make scientific men and women think; and that is that it has the lowest death-rate of any hospital in London. It is the only one where patients are treated without a drop of alcoholic liquor; where accidents, burns, scalds, attempted suicides, and illnesses of all kinds are never treated with alcohol; where everything is performed that common sense, science, and skill can do to prolong life and soothe pain, but just not that one superstitious rite of administering alcohol.

And now I am going to speak personally. The question arises: "What have you done? How are you living up to the principle of total abstinence you advocate?" I have done this. I was not born a total abstainer.

That marvellous noonday light came to me that comes to some of us. It came through a great happiness. And, young women and young men, let God teach you the common lessons of life through your happiness, and don't wait to learn them through great sorrow. I have sometimes thought, if I had not learned the lesson through this joy, that I might have learned it through some bitter pain. Now and again, in my work of nursing in hospitals and in the lunatic asylum, I had had attacks of being a temporary abstainer; but I was not a permanent one. I called them fanatics, weak-kneed people, bigoted, prejudiced; and, yea, this retribution has fallen upon me, that I am now the worst of the lot. It came in this way. I married a total abstainer. He said no word about my joining the movement, but left me to work out my own salvation. One night, after we had been married about three weeks, I had to sit up for him. He had driven into the country in a bitter, blinding winter's storm, and so I sat up through that night waiting for him. It was the first night that I had been alone since we were married; and through the pauses of the wind came the solemn boom of the guns of ships in distress, and I began to partake of the sorrow of those who were watching for the sailors out at sea, and at last I went down to the shore among the women who were waiting for those who were being saved from the wreck and brought to shore in the life-boat. When I came home,

I thought of all the poor women in England, Scotland, and Ireland who were doing what I was doing, and doing it so differently. I was in a beautiful home, with all the comforts of life around me, waiting for my husband with the eagerness of happy love; and they in poverty and hunger, awaiting in some lonely garret the dreaded step on the stairs of a drink-maddened brute, in abject terror for the coming of their husband. And then conscience spoke. What was I doing? He on the safe side; you the unsafe. With two people who love each other well, one of two things would certainly happen,—either he would drag me over to his safe side or I should drag him over to my unsafe side. I liked my glass of wine, I loved my husband: which of the two was I to choose between, —wine, the thing I liked, or the being I loved? I saw which that night. And so the next morning there crept a very meek and very humble figure to the old rector in the rectory. I said, "I want to join the temperance society." He was very wise. I wish more people were wise in such matters. He did not crow over me,—no: he held out two hands of welcome, and said: "You don't know how glad we shall be. You will be a great help." Some of you are not patient enough with the people who don't agree with you. It is of no use hurrying up the human race: it cannot be hurried; it must walk before it can run. There are some people who must be waited for through many years: they cannot be

brought right in a moment. And sometimes it is the more thoughtful people who do not come along quickly. Their opinions are matters of conviction: they take time to form them. Now, although our rector was a stanch teetotaller, he let me choose my own way of coming along. I think he knew the caught Tartar needs skilful handling. So I joined the lazy division of the Church of England Temperance Society, not the B division of "totallers," but the A division of those who merely promise to help, and not to drink alcoholic liquor between meals! You see I had said such bad things about blue-ribboned fanatics, I could not belong to them at once, I thought. I imagined a house could stand on two foundations without toppling, and a society have a dual basis without breaking down. "Which is impossible," as old Euclid says.

Well, the rector set me to work. That is the way to do. Don't give all the work to the ready-made saints: set some of the sinners to work. That is the way to convert them. Well, he set me to work to write a story and read it in a place that had never heard a woman's voice in public. It had seen her act love-parts in a theatre, and heard her sing love-songs in the concert hall, and it was not ashamed of that; but, when it came to think of a woman standing on a platform and speaking words of common sense to the people, it said it would turn the world upside down. I wrote out the

brightest story I could think of, wrung out of some former experience. I stood up that night in the mission hall half full of women with veils on their faces, and at one end some modest men ready to run if they could not bear the dreadful immodesty of the thing. Instead of running, however, they stayed to the end; and afterward I was invited to read another story. The next time was my baptism. Down in the front there sat a poor, weather-beaten fellow; and they said: "If you can only get that man! He is the worst drunkard in the place." So into that story I put a great deal that was especially for his good. I did not talk at him, but I read at him. After the meeting was over, I went down to try and coax him to come to the pledge-table. I brought him to the table, and I smoothed out the book. This was my first convert. How delightful it was! Just as he was going to sign his name, he turned round and asked one very simple but awkward question. "I guess you have done it yourself, missis?" he said. I gave a very awkward answer. Pity my bad taste. I told him, with a little shrug of my shoulders, that it was not necessary for me to sign it,—the total abstinence pledge,—but that it was the only thing that would save him. He slammed the pen down, and went down the hall, saying, "What is sauce for the goose is sauce for the gander; and what is good for you is good for me, I reckon." Then I had an inward fight to fight,—one of those

battles that no one knows but God and yourself; but you are ten years older when you have fought it, whether you lose or conquer. I was quite ten years older when I went down the hall and laid my hand on his arm, and said: "Perhaps it is you that are to save me. I will take the pledge first, and you shall take it after me." And so the happy, affectionate woman, who had never been drunk in her life, and the hard, weather-beaten man, who had been drunk nearly every day, stood there together; and there the baptismal service was performed by that drunkard for the sober woman rather than by the sober woman for the drunkard. And the lesson I learned that night was this: that whatever you want others to do you must do yourself before you ask them to do it.

Then I wanted one more lesson, and got it. That is rather personal. We had no alcohol in our house. My husband did not order it for medicine. But one night, about seven years ago, we gave our last dinner-party,—the last dinner-party, I think, we will ever give; for we have come to the conclusion that it is a waste of time to invite people who have enough to eat already, when around there are so many starving, especially in London. To that dinner-party we invited a man who is artist, poet, philanthropist, and preacher,—that is, Rev. Stopford A. Brooke. So I said to my husband: "I should not think of getting wine for any of the others; but it is

such an honor to entertain so great a man, and no doubt he is a first-rate judge of wine, that we must get the best we possibly can." He did not think it was right to sell conscience for even Rev. Stopford Brooke, but I got my own way. And, dear women, that is why *we* must take up the work; for we are the home rulers generally, and we settle what is to be on our tables more often than do our husbands. We got the best champagne and claret and sherry. I dare not insult you by telling you what we paid for it. It was the only way we had of judging whether it was good or not. Then the eventful evening came. I said, "Now, if everything else is wrong, I know the wine is right for the great man." It was passed around, but he coolly poured out some water. I, remembering what the wine had cost said, "Won't you take some champagne?" "No, thank you, Mrs. Chant: I am a total abstainer; and, what is more," added he, "I thought you said you were one, too." If ever a wretched hostess sat at the head of her table, I sat there that night. I should like to have taken those decanters and knocked them together, and thrown them into the dust-hole. As it was, the next morning, thinking of the part I had played, I poured the liquor that was left down into the dust-hole; and no, never, under any circumstances,—not even if Queen Victoria or the President of the United States comes,—shall I offer them a drop of wine. I have

come to the conclusion, when I look upon our poverty-stricken homes, that it is a Pharisaical thing to ask the poor to do without things that we well-clothed people think we cannot do without. I think we ought to set them an example, or leave it alone altogether.

I know there is another side to this. I know there are those who say we have no right to legislate for our guests, when they come to see us. But I say, Be consistent. If you are going to get everything that your guest takes, you will have such an array of bottles on your sideboard and food on the table that you will not have room for the guest! To be sure, your guest says that his doctor has ordered him whiskey and water. Well, does he expect you to provide him with medicine? And in this case too often the patient himself is the doctor. Also, there are some kinds of doctor's orders that are like Tennyson's "Brook,"—they go on forever and forever. There is one man in our neighborhood who takes whiskey by the doctor's orders, and we have been making inquiries as to how long the doctor has ordered this medicine. It seems that ten or twelve years ago his doctor ordered him two or three useful drugs and alcoholic liquor. Why does he not go on taking those other drugs, if he wants to be loyal to his doctor's prescription? No, let us be honest, and say that we take it because we like it. I liked it once,—I can understand all about that.

The dinner does not seem a dinner to some without their wine or port. Also, they say you cannot do hard work without it. Let me make a humble confession of the work that God has asked of one small woman. You can reckon it up when I say that in fifteen years I have preached and lectured over four thousand times; and even with this I have found time to be on many committees, write poems and songs, look after my household, befriend those who most sorely needed it, besides which I have made my children's clothes for years together, and kept kindly, industrious fingers for the bodies of other and poorer little people. I think that you will agree with me that there is something to be said in favor of total abstinence, to be able to go through such work as that, and not only live, but to be stronger and better and gayer as the years go on.

To all of you young people I will say that, even if it were not a matter of conscience, I would say as a matter of common sense, do not take those narcotics if you wish to get to the front of life. You need to be able to summon to your aid every particle of your reason at a moment's notice. What right have you to take that which, if you take the smallest drop, just so far cripples the reason even in the smallest degree? We have none of us too much brains. We have none of us too much conscience, too much reasoning faculty. We ought to have all of

it at our command. Let us not take anything which dulls even the remotest edge of it, and eventually pulls the reason down from its pre-eminent place.

In conclusion, let me tell you one story. I don't think some of you realize what drink is doing, what heart-rending work it is doing in your own land. I want to tell you one instance to show what it means in England, and what a tremendous burden of responsibility it lays on you and me. I had been up to some meeting in the north of England, and was returning on the last train. I generally return at night in a small, first-class carriage all alone. Though I am often very tired during those long midnight journeys, I think a good deal, and my education goes on. I landed in London at half-past four. There was a blinding snow-storm. London was wrapped in darkness, and the most piercing east wind that you can imagine. As I rode in my hansom cab, I had found some poor homeless men, who had wandered up and down the city, and had come to see if they could get work in London; and I had taken them to a coffee stall which the temperance people run at night to make provision for just such cases. I had said good-night to them, and driven away, when, lo! in that dim light I saw something lying in the snow on the steps of a public house. I got out of my cab, and went to this dark mound of something, and pushed the snow away with my hands, then

called the cabman to come and help me; for it was a poor, miserable little girl of about eleven years of age, dead drunk upon that doorstep! We took her up, but she was so drunk that she was perfectly stupid. "We must take her to the lock-up," said the cabman. But what would you have thought of me, what should I have been, if I could have handed her over to the policeman in her extremity? I took her, drunk as she was, to my home. We did not get her warm too quickly, for fear she might have been snow-bitten. When she woke up, the first thing she called for was gin and no water in it. Then fell to me the task of undressing and washing her. Young girl, you will never be fit for royal work until you have done in kindly fashion the humblest thing that can be done. I could not ask my maid-servant to do it, the girl was so vermin-laden and loathsome: it was my duty, who knew best how to do it. I read upon her poor skin the Odyssey of suffering that a child could go through. Not one spot was there upon that body where you could lay a half-dollar that was not scarred by the beating and the bruises she had had. It told the whole story at once,—a drunken father and, very likely, a drunken mother. We fed the child, and took care of it. The most pathetic horror of that incident came to me later. That was that this child was so smileless. One day my little boy succeeded in making her laugh. It was painful to

see, and she was so conscious of the newness of the sensation that she burst into tears. We sent her down into the country, and spared no pains over her. But the care came too late. Six weeks after, the burial service had to be read over her: "Our sister departed in the hope of a glorious resurrection." Then I hunted up the father and mother. All the moan they raised over that child was, "Who will go out and beg for us now?" Shall we punish the father and mother for neglecting the child? Yes; but in that case we must punish also some one else. Punish the man who sold the liquor. Yes; but there is some one else. Punish the man who manufactured that liquor. Yes; but there is still some one else who ought to be punished, and that is the respectable Christian people in and out of the churches who say it is none of their business what mischief goes on, and who are willing to sell souls and country for drink so long as *they* can be rich and comfortable and float along with the tide of fashion.

You are asked to-night to join this society. This is Memorial Day. Oh, let those who have not joined us do so to-night, and then this will be truly a memorial day for them and the world. You will join the Grand Army of those who have given up self and selfishness, and with a splendid faith have said, "We will wipe from its history the shame and disgrace, the folly and the crime, that have been too long a part of our national life."

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